

Shots Ring Out, a Man Falls and the Fear Mounts

Milloy, Courtland

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COURTLAND MILLOY

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It sounded like a car backfiring. But cars don't usually backfire four times. As I made that calculation, a man staggered toward me. Cars were swerving around him and speeding away from the corner at 15th and R streets NW.

"Somebody call an ambulance," the man moaned through clenched teeth. There were two blood-rimmed holes the size of dimes in the seat of his pants.

He had been standing next to his car about a block away when a man wearing a green ski mask came out of an alley Wednesday afternoon and fired four shots at him from a .45-caliber handgun.

In the distance, sirens grew louder. The

man told me he was Aaron. He was 20 years old, and he was a security guard. A neighborhood mechanic had been installing stereo speakers in his car when he was shot.

Within minutes, nearly a dozen patrol officers, detectives and undercover police officers, firefighters and medics were on the corner. The voices on their walkie-talkies, and the snatches of dispatches that I overheard, became angrier and angrier:

Aaron, the man gritting his teeth as he bled on the sidewalk, was a government witness in a series of street robbery cases that police had cracked last year.

"What the hell is this?" a senior detective fumed.

Aaron was scheduled to testify in D.C. Superior Court on Thursday—the next day.

After talking with several witnesses, police concluded that the man who shot Aaron bore a striking resemblance to the man scheduled for trial.

Witness intimidation and retaliation have become so commonplace that the D.C. Council and the Maryland legislature are considering strengthening penalties for thugs who threaten prospective witnesses.

But those laws would come as little comfort to people who already are so frightened that no one has to threaten them.

"I didn't see nothing," said Sam, the shade tree mechanic who had been standing right next to Aaron when the gunman opened fire. "I ran, man. I mean, it wasn't like I was standing around trying to catch a bullet."

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A Witness to the Violence

MILLOY, From B1

Aaron was still on the corner, face down on the sidewalk. Medics were cutting off his pants with knives and scissors. He had been shot in the buttocks, so they wrapped him in a special plastic blanket that keeps blood flowing to the brain instead of getting lost through the wounds.

Suddenly, Aaron struggled to get up.

"Where is my son?"

His voice was muffled by the oxygen mask over his face, but the terror came through. His 2-year-old son was in the car when the shooting began.

An elderly woman had removed the boy from the car and taken him into her home.

"Lord, the poor child was caught in the line of fire," the woman said, rubbing the boy's head. The boy was sniffling and heaving. His face was puffy and his eyes were red. "He was hysterical," the woman said.

And he wasn't the only one. A lot of people who happened to be near this corner where there is a mix of renovated row houses, apartments and churches had been unnerved by the shooting.

One of the calmest people around was a cabdriver named Johnson, who happened to be passing by when he heard the gunfire. He was the one who called police when it seemed that everyone else—including myself—had simply frozen.

"Man, I do this all the time," Johnson said.

Nearly 2,000 people were shot last year in the District—and close to a fourth of them died, some of them because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"I guess we can be thankful that we didn't have another innocent bystander killed," a police officer said.

Evidence technicians combing the scene found a hole from a stray bullet in a car with Massachusetts license plates

parked nearby. The slug had entered just above the gas tank, pierced the center of the back seat on the driver's side and lodged in the front passenger's seat.

Another stray bullet had pierced the trunk of Aaron's car, and flown into the passenger compartment, barely missing Aaron's son. Still another slug had left a hole the size of a fist in the living room window of an apartment across the street.

The bullet had traveled across the living room and entered the kitchen, where it ricocheted off a wall before landing on the stove.

"If I had been standing over my stove stirring something, I would have been hit in the head," said the woman who lives there. Last spring, while weeding in her garden, the woman said, she found a "big metal handgun" buried there.

Police said the gun had been discarded after being used in a street robbery.

Aaron had collapsed near Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, and the sight of yellow police tape cordoning off a house of worship disturbed some of the members who had congregated outside.

"How long are they going to keep this up?" one woman asked. She was referring to the tape. But the question made me think about Aaron, his son and the continuing cycle of pain.

On Thursday morning, the man police say shot Aaron appeared in D.C. Superior Court for his robbery trial. A detective was waiting. Eric Downing, 20, of the 1400 block of S Street NW, was arrested on the spot. He was charged with assault with a deadly weapon and held without bond.

Aaron was still in the hospital yesterday. A single bullet had torn into one side of his buttocks and ripped out of the other.

He was in stable condition, which is more than can be said for the city.